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SUBJECT: THE CENTRALIZING RUSSIAN STATE MEETS THE NORTH CAUCASUS

Classified By: Minister Counselor for Political Affairs Kirk Augustine.  
Reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶11. (C) Summary: The lesson of 500 years of Russian statecraft is clear: when the Center is strong, it centralizes, eliminating alternative power structures. Putin, seeking to show that he -- and Russia under his leadership -- are strong, is seeking to centralize. He is doing so by eliminating ethnically based autonomies, starting with those that have caused no problems for the Center. The net effect is to give Slavs more control over former ethnic homelands. While some ethnic homelands have disappeared in Siberia, the strategy has run into resistance in the already troubled North Caucasus. Adyge President Sovmen resigned April 14 rather than preside over the incorporation of his Republic into the surrounding Krasnodar Kray. He drew support from the other Adygh peoples, including the Kabardians and Cherkess and their large overseas diaspora. Strong ethnic nationalism in the Caucasus, the legacy of Soviet nationality policies, and the realization that Moscow was unswayed by local concerns promoted an upsurge of resentment and unrest throughout the region, already suffering from the rapid growth of religious extremism. Faced with this prospect, the Kremlin backed down April 17 -- for now. End Summary.

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Who are the Adyghs?  
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¶12. (C) Adyghs are the indigenous population of the Northwest Caucasus. Sub-groups include the Kabardians, Cherkess, Shapsugs and Ubykh. The Abkhaz, further south, are cousins. The Adyghs were long linked to the great Middle Eastern empires -- Adygh boys became Mamluk Sultans in the 14th and 15th centuries, and the Adyghs were nominally under Ottoman patronage until the Treaty of Kuchuk Kaynarja in 1774. The Russian conquests of the 19th century led to mass migrations of a majority of Adyghs to the Ottoman empire. Adygh ("Cherkess" or "Circassian") communities are significant today in Turkey, Jordan, Syria and Paterson, New Jersey.

¶13. (C) Descendants of those who remained in Russia are scattered through the North Caucasus, and are a majority only in Kabardino-Balkaria. The Cherkess are a titular, but minority, nationality in Karachayev-Chechenia. The Shapsugs of the Black Sea coast were unsuccessful in obtaining a titular homeland in their native area, near Sochi. The Republic of Adygea was created in 1991 as a titular homeland for Adyghs, carved out of the Krasnodar Kray that completely surrounds it. Though Adyghs make up only 20 percent of the population, legal guarantees give control of the political system to Adyghs, including Shapsugs who moved in.

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The April Events

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¶ 4. (C) For three years, the Kremlin has been promoting the "amalgamation" ("ukrupneniye") of regions. Several Siberian ethnic homelands have been incorporated into neighboring regions, starting with the incorporation of Komi into Perm three years ago. The first attempt to implement this policy in the North Caucasus ran into resistance. On April 4 Adyge President Khazrat Sovmen publicly denounced plans to hold a referendum on re-incorporating Adyge into Krasnodar -- a referendum that would easily carry on the votes of the majority Slavic population. Two days later demonstrators poured into the streets of Maykop, Adyge's capital, in support of Sovmen. Joining the demonstration was the Adyge Khase, a Shapsug nationalist organization -- Sovmen is himself a Shapsug. Sovmen gave interviews blaming the crisis on Putin's Plenipotentiary Representative in the Southern Federal District, Dmitriy Kozak. After several days of jockeying and an April 11 meeting between Sovmen and Presidential Administration chief Sobyanin -- with Kozak present -- Sovmen on April 14 submitted his resignation to President Putin, leaving in charge Dr. Murat Kudayev, head of one of the Republic's sub-districts.

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Dire Warnings  
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¶ 5. (C) The prospective swallowing of this small ethnic homeland by a larger Slavic entity sent shock waves through the North Caucasus. Small nations there have kept their identities for thousands of years, despite invasions by Indo-European and Turkic peoples, by retreating to the region's mountains and forests and developing tightly-knit

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societies, extraordinary toughness and languages no outsider can pronounce. Locals feared this was only the first step. The shock waves first hit the other Adygh enclaves, Karachayevo-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria, whose Adygh populations participated in the Maykop protests. Kabardians, especially, are quick to defend their co-ethnics -- they sent hundreds of fighters to Abkhazia in the early 1990s; today's Abkhaz "Defense Minister," Sosnaliyev, is a Kabardian.

¶ 6. (C) The concerns were shared in the rest of the North Caucasus, where disputes over territory claim lives to this day. No one considers current territorial boundaries optimal, but all fear that attempts to change them could be pulling the thread that unravels the whole cloth. As Makhachkala Duma Deputy Gadzhi Makhachev (an Avar) told us, "What are they going to do? Unite us with Chechnya? Unite Chechnya with Stavropol? It will all end in blood." Makhachev himself was involved in a dispute several years ago with Chechen warlord Sulim Yamadayev, who drove ethnic Avars out of their homes in north-east Chechnya; Makhachev fears that attempts to change the boundaries will mask similar land-grabs.

¶ 7. (C) Many Moscow commentators were mystified by Putin's insistence on this course of action. Even Russian nationalist commentator Sergey Markedonov -- who is virulently opposed to "ethno-territorial formations" and the "exceptionalism" granted to the Chechens and other satraps in the Caucasus -- told us he regarded the tactics as heavy-handed and likely to lead to destabilization. He would have favored a demand that the Russian constitution apply in Adygea -- meaning that the special privileges given to Adyghs would be abolished by administrative action, allowing the 70 percent Slavic majority to dominate without changing administrative structures. Markedonov challenged the strategy, as well, in a recent publication, asking, "Why is "amalgamation" viewed as tantamount to saving the country from collapse, and equated with the strengthening of the state?"

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The Climb-Down  
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18. (C) Faced with such prospects, this week the Kremlin climbed down. On April 17 Putin met with Sovmen, and on the 18th a brief announcement reversed Sovmen's resignation. On April 20 Kozak met in Rostov with the Speaker of Adyge's People's Assembly, Ruslan Khadzhibiyekov. In remarks afterward he acknowledged that Sovmen would serve out his term, but "we will correct him" if his initiatives go too far. Asked about the referendum on unification, Kozak back-pedaled fast: it was a local concern, he said, not a federal question at all. The Speaker, however, was strident. Unification? "Don't you believe it. Not today, not tomorrow, not in the future."

19. (C) It is unclear whether the climb-down is permanent. An official of the Presidential Administration, Aleksandr Machevskiy, reminded us April 21 that Sovmen's current term is up in a year. After that, he predicted, the referendum would be held and the Slavic population would vote for unification with Krasnodar. He believed that Putin could calm regional fears by declaring that this would be the only such unification in the North Caucasus. Indeed, Machevskiy said, no other amalgamation would be possible in the region.

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Comment  
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10. (C) In our view, Markedonov put his finger on the ideological mindset that sees "amalgamation" as the solution to seemingly unrelated problems. To an American observer watching the rapid and unchecked spread of jihadist Islam in the North Caucasus, the Kremlin's insistence on making administrative changes that reduce the number of local governments without changing governance itself looks like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic -- or worse, since the move will predictably fan local resentment of Russians and exacerbate other inter-ethnic problems. To Putin, however, the prominence of autonomies may have been a reminder of Russia's weakness in the Yeltsin era. As one bible-quoting Russian official told us, "There is a time for casting away stones and a time for gathering stones together; now is the time for gathering stones."

11. (C) In gathering together the stones of the Caucasus Mountains, however, Putin is also trying to reverse the effects of 70 years of Soviet nationalities policy. After initial failures (the Soviet "Mountain Republic," including

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all the North Caucasus except Dagestan, broke up after only six months), the Soviets developed a policy of giving "titular" nationalities their own homelands. The policy of "korenizatsiya" meant that the "root" ("koren") population of any territory received special rights to dominate that homeland. That legacy has become so deeply rooted in the already nationalist local cultures that an attempt to abolish those privileges is perceived as Russification and cultural genocide -- and evokes bitter memories of repeated wars, exiles and deportations. It is that legacy, rather than a calming Presidential statement, which is likely to dominate regional emotions. But Putin appears to be following the book of Russian statecraft and the 500 year-old dream -- never quite realized -- of a unitary Russian state.

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